

## The Wars of Invasion in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica, 1492–1547

MATTHEW RESTALL

### Turning Cortés into Columbus

On the walls of the grand staircase in the old Mexican embassy in Washington, DC there is a captivating but perplexing mural. A visitor climbing the stairs is faced with a depiction of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlán, a peaceful scene of settlement, agriculture, artisanry and family life. Painted in the early twentieth century, this romantic rendering faithfully reflects how the Aztecs were represented by the great Mexican muralists of the early decades of the century.

But that idyll is a calm before the storm, for on the wall to the left the Spanish conquistadors are advancing. Soldiers, priests and administrators row to shore from an oversized sailing ship – symbolically larger even than an Aztec pyramid – and, on land, one invader plants a cross while another wields a sword. That red-bearded conquistador with a sword is recognisable as Pedro de Alvarado, a captain in the conquest wars against both the Aztecs of Mexico and the Mayas of Guatemala, a man whose reputation for violence has survived to this day. One might therefore expect the figure towering over the scene to be Hernando Cortés, the leading Spanish captain of the conquistador expedition that destroyed Tenochtitlán – and indeed such was the muralist's original plan.

But after Mexico became an independent nation in 1821, Cortés became unpopular, an uneasy symbol of the colonial past that Mexicans were putting behind them; and after the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910, his unpopularity increased. Roberto Cueva Del Rio, the Mexican painter who began the mural in 1933, intending at first to depict Cortés, decided by the time he completed the work in 1941 to replace the infamous conquistador with Christopher Columbus – a more neutral figure, who could be depicted in non-military clothing, holding an unfurled banner rather than a sword. The inclusion of Columbus would have made sense – and still makes sense – to local US visitors to the embassy. For in the nineteenth century the Genoese



Figure 7.1 The stairway corner separating Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors from the Aztecs and their capital city of Tenochtitlan; mural painted by Roberto Cueva Del Rio in 1933–41 in the Mexican Embassy in Washington, DC, now the Mexican Cultural Institute.

discoverer of the New World was appropriated by the United States as a patriotic icon, a founder of ‘America’, depicted in dozens of statues and paintings in public places across Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup>

Thus for North Americans, those of the United States and Mexico alike, substituting Columbus for Cortés emphasised discovery over conquest, exploration over invasion, peaceful encounter over violence. While Columbus’s inclusion in the embassy mural is therefore initially discordant – his transatlantic voyages of 1492–1504 did not touch upon the Aztec Empire, which was not discovered by Spaniards until 1519 – it nonetheless invokes a pair of important themes for this chapter. First, I argue that we can better understand the wars of invasion and conquest that swept the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America in the half-century after 1492 by viewing them as part of a single process – albeit a complex, multi-staged one. The point is not to assign

<sup>1</sup> See information presented on site at the Mexican Cultural Institute of Washington, DC, and the essay by Harry Iceland on the institute’s website, [www.instituteofmexicocdc.org/mansion.php#murals](http://www.instituteofmexicocdc.org/mansion.php#murals). Cueva Del Rio was inspired by his mentor, Diego Rivera, but also by early engraved depictions of the conquest era by European artists such as Theodor De Bry.

responsibility to Columbus, but to emphasise that the historical phenomenon that would bring upheaval to Aztecs, Mayas and other Mesoamericans began in the decade of Columbus's early voyages.

Second, the modern invention of Columbus as a US patriotic icon, eclipsing Cortés as a problematic figure, prompts us to ponder what it was about those wars that causes discomfort even centuries later. The answer is not simple, but for our purposes a simple one will act as a reasonable focus: violence. Those wars were characterised by multiple forms of violence above and beyond the violence of battlefield casualties or other military encounters. Invasion and colonisation are inherently violent, but in the case of the Americas the invaders brought new diseases that devastated indigenous communities. They also failed to respect the indigenous tradition of a war season, thereby disrupting agricultural cycles and creating famine. Their demand for labour and their insistence on the abandonment of religious, marital and other cultural practices prompted further social, political and economic disruptions that often had violent effects on indigenous families.

Above all, the conquistadors and early generations of colonisers enslaved indigenous peoples by the hundreds of thousands. Under Spanish law, it was illegal to enslave 'Indians', but two loopholes were mercilessly exploited. 'Indians' could be branded and sold if already enslaved by other 'Indians', in which case they were not freed but 'rescued' through enslavement to Spaniards. They could also be taken as slaves if they could be classified as rebels against the Spanish monarch. Fighting-age men were often slaughtered, but women and children were routinely enslaved and sold at auction or relocated away from their home towns – even as far away as Spain. There was a brisk traffic in young indigenous girls as sex slaves; one such victim, Malintzin or Malinche, achieved some status and lasting fame as Cortés's interpreter, although her story – and thus that of the trade in general – has been distorted into one of opportunism (by her) or romance (she bore him a son).<sup>2</sup>

It is thus hard to imagine there was a family in the Caribbean or Mesoamerica, let alone a village, that was not impacted, if not torn apart, by one or more of these forms of violent disruption. Indeed, the violence of the invasion was so multifaceted and widespread that it is has even been suggested that we debate categorising it as genocidal.<sup>3</sup>

2 Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006). On indigenous rebellion as a legal loophole, see Chapter 21 in this volume.

3 See, e.g., my discussion of Tzvetan Todorov in Matthew Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting That Changed History* (New York: Ecco, 2018), pp. 328–30, 347–8.

## The Caribbean: The ‘Yoke of Slavery’

The inhuman death of Hatuey occasioned so universal a dread among the Indians of Cuba, that without further resistance they submitted to the yoke of slavery

J. H. Campe, 1799<sup>4</sup>

In the early months of 1515 a Spanish ship dropped anchor near Cumaná, off the coast of Venezuela. The ship’s captain, Gómez de Ribera, went ashore with a small entourage, made contact with a local group identified simply as *indios* (‘Indians’), and invited them aboard his ship to trade. At the time this particular strip of Caribbean coastline was controlled by Dominican friars, and so its indigenous population spoke a little Spanish and had developed some trust in Spaniards – hence Ribera’s success in persuading eighteen men and women to take the boats out to his ship. But instead of talking trade, the captain raised anchor and sailed to Hispaniola. There the eighteen ‘Indians’, now chained and branded on the face, were sold as slaves.<sup>5</sup>

This tiny tale is neatly illustrative of the larger story of Spanish–indigenous interaction in the Caribbean, circum-Caribbean, Central America and Mexico in the half-century following 1492. In general terms, those of the bare outline of facts, the incident reflects how indigenous peoples suffered various forms of violence – from betrayal, enslavement and displacement to rape, mutilation and massacre – despite competing Spanish visions of colonialism. Viewed thus, it is violent interaction, not God, gold and glory, that most characterised the earliest decades of European exploration and settlement in the Americas.

The more complex history of early Spanish colonialism in the region is also illustrated in the details of the 1515 anecdote, specifically in the legal loopholes and categories that Ribera used. For example, Ribera and his crew were not licensed slave traders; their mandate was to find the ‘Caribs’ who had killed a pair of Spaniards on the island of San Vicente. Since the first use of ‘Carib’ – coined during the 1493 Columbus expedition – to designate hostile indigenous groups, Spaniards had reduced the ethnic complexity of the islands and

4 Hatuey was a Taino ruler. Quote from the earliest English translation (from German) of J. H. Campe, *Columbus; or, the Discovery of America: As Related by a Father to His Children, and Designed for the Instruction of Youth* (London: Sampson Low, 1799), vol. 11 Vol. 2, p. 179.

5 I rely for my summary of this case on Erin Woodruff Stone, ‘Slave Raiders vs. Friars: Tierra Firme, 1513–1522’, *The Americas* 74.2 (2017), 139–70, but also see Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951), vol. 111, pp. 127–31, and Enrique Otte, *Cédulas reales relativas a Venezuela, 1500–1550* (Caracas: Fundaciones John Boulton y Eugenio Mendoza, 1963), pp. 101–4.

circum-Caribbean coastal regions to a dichotomy of two invented categories. We might call them ‘good Indians’ and ‘bad Indians’, not labels officially used by Spaniards but ones recognisable to Europeans and their descendants in the Americas for centuries since 1493. We know the former as Tainos (although scholars recognise that this category is also invented, and the process of recovering pre-Columbian ethnic identities is still ongoing); *nitaino* is an adjective meaning ‘good, noble’ in the Taino language. The latter, the *caribes*, were classified as violent cannibals (hence the name), whose nature thereby made it legal to slaughter or enslave them.

There is no evidence that Ribera’s ship bothered to sail to San Vicente at all. Most likely they found a convenient bay near a Dominican mission in order to trick peaceful indios into being kidnapped and reclassified as enslavable caribes: a quicker and less dangerous prospect than hunting ‘real’ caribes. Such a manipulation of invented categories was standard Spanish practice throughout the region. Equally common was the collaboration in this abuse by Spanish officials; Ribera’s eighteen captives were purchased in Santo Domingo (Hispaniola’s capital) by local magistrates and *encomenderos* (Spaniards with licences to access the tribute and labour of specified communities), who surely knew that Ribera had fudged his documentation, even before a letter of protest reached the city from the friars on the Venezuelan coast. Among the eighteen were the baptised local *cacique* (indigenous chief or local ruler), don Alonso, and his wife; even within the contorted logic of Spanish law, the couple could not legally be enslaved.

The case was scandalous enough that it generated paperwork, and was preserved for posterity in the outraged phrases of the era’s most famous Dominican, Bartolomé de las Casas, the bishop-friar who campaigned at court in defence of indigenous rights (earning him infamy among the conquistadors but fame in the modern era). But don Alonso, his family and compatriots were never returned to their homes. And by the end of 1515 the missions in the Cumaná area were destroyed (either by men avenging don Alonso’s kidnapping, or by enemies taking advantage of his absence). In 1518 the king ordered Judge Alonso de Zuazo on Hispaniola to find and repatriate don Alonso’s wife (the unnamed *cacica*), but there is no evidence this was done, and the order ignores the other seventeen captives (although it does state that generally speaking illegally enslaved indios are to be deposited in Franciscan or Dominican monasteries). The details are again illustrative of larger patterns: there *were* laws in place designed to protect indigenous groups and facilitate peaceful colonial settlement, and there *were* Spaniards willing to fight to enforce those laws; but they were almost

always outnumbered by those who viewed the legal loopholes as the very licences that made their presence and profits possible.<sup>6</sup>

The *quebrantamiento*, the great ‘breaking’ of the Taino population of the first decade of the century as a result of violence, enslavement and overwork in placer gold mining, led to a decade of slave raiding across the Caribbean – from Florida to the northern coasts of South America. The islands in between were decimated. Tens of thousands were enslaved. The slaughter and disruption to family life and food production caused the indigenous population to drop within a generation by hundreds of thousands – if not by millions, as Las Casas claimed (we may never know the precise numbers, which modern scholars have fiercely debated).<sup>7</sup>

Then a smallpox epidemic hit the greater Caribbean region in 1518, killing a quarter of the indio population of Hispaniola in a matter of months (or so Zuazo claimed), prompting a dramatic increase in the issuing of slave raiding licences. Faced with increasingly poor ‘harvests’ of ‘Indians’, Spaniards in the Caribbean jumped at the opportunity to reap the benefits of an untapped mainland. As it happened, in 1517 the governor of Cuba, Diego de Velázquez, had sent an expedition to explore the mainland coastline and what was then perceived to be a large island – Yucatán. The expedition (whose leader, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, was fatally wounded) had returned with tantalising evidence of wealthy and well-populated indigenous kingdoms. As a result, 1517 would prove to be the starting date of a pair of interlocking thirty-year wars – a Spanish–Mesoamerican Thirty Years War and a Spanish–Maya Thirty Years War.<sup>8</sup>

### The ‘Conquest of Mexico’: ‘Some of Evil Disposition’

As men, not all of us are very good – rather, there are some of evil disposition  
Bernal Díaz, 1580s<sup>9</sup>

6 Stone, ‘Slave Raiders vs. Friars’, 139–42, 154–5; Otte, *Cédulas reales*, pp. 103–4.

7 Massimo Livi Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Erin Woodruff Stone, ‘Indian Harvest: The Rise of the Indian Slave Trade and Diaspora from Española to the Circum-Caribbean, 1492–1542’, unpublished PhD thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2014 (‘harvest’ of ‘Indians’ plays off the title of this dissertation; see also Stone, ‘Slave Raiders vs. Friars’); Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), pp. 34–45, 325.

8 Note that these designations are inventions of mine, intended to help convey the larger picture, and not to be confused with the Thirty Years War (a European conflict of 1618–48).

9 My translation from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, ed. José Antonio Barbón Rodríguez (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2005), vol. 1 p. 834, quoted more fully below.

Viewing the violence of the decades after 1517 as a pair of thirty-year wars is innovative because it privileges the indigenous perspective, which is not how the invasion has tended to be seen for the past five centuries. For Mesoamericans, year after year the invasion's many forms of violence disrupted their lives and destroyed their families. But for Spaniards, the war was soon reduced to a two-year story of miraculous triumph. That story was the 1519–21 war in Mexico, culminating in the siege and seizure of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. For Spaniards and other Europeans, the war soon became known as the Conquest of Mexico. That term – which Spaniards began using soon after the war – was set in stone after 1552 by the success of Francisco López de Gómara's *La Conquista de México*, a hagiographic history that praised and promoted the role of Cortés as the leading conquistador in that war.<sup>10</sup> Still used today as the common name for the war, it ignores the violence and warfare that followed 1521, and helps perpetuate the Spanish view of the war as a brief, predestined and glorious conquest of a barbarian empire.

The essential events of the war are well known, but it is worth summarising them with an emphasis on the forms of violence that the conflict brought to, or exacerbated in, Mesoamerica. The 1517 expedition sponsored by Governor Velázquez, which had returned early following a punishing defeat by a Maya army on the coast of Yucatán, was followed by two more, in 1518 and 1519. The Spanish captains who led these expeditions were mandated by Velázquez to explore, trade and – if the captains could use the legal loopholes of 'Indian' cannibalism and rebellion – enslave, but not to conquer and settle. Yet the men who comprised these companies were not primarily explorers, merchants or soldiers; they were armed settlers. They explored, fought and sought to trade in loot and slaves as a means to an end: to settle as privileged colonists in new Spanish provinces.

The 1518 expedition reached the coastal edges of the Aztec Empire, turning back to report to the Governor of Cuba as instructed. But the 1519 company pushed further up the coast, into the region around today's Veracruz, where they quarrelled for four months over whether to return to Cuba or reconstitute themselves as a new company answerable only to the Spanish king. The company had initially consisted of about 450 Spanish men and over a thousand Taino slaves and servants, as well as small numbers of African slaves and servants, some non-Taino women, a dozen horses and some mastiffs (or war dogs). The majority would die in the war that followed,

<sup>10</sup> Available in translation as *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).



replaced by others (the original 450 men constituted less than 15 per cent of the total number of conquistadors who came from the Caribbean and Spain to join the conflict of 1519–21) and supplemented by many tens of thousands of indigenous allies.

Choosing to betray Velázquez and replace him with Cortés, the company set off in August 1519 on an inland march that would take them, three months later, into the Valley of Mexico and the heartland of the Aztec Empire. En route, they encountered the city-state of Tlaxcala, which they fought to a stalemate. The Spaniards and the Tlaxcalteca agreed to a treaty and an alliance; the leaders of Tlaxcala persuaded the Spanish captains that the Aztec Empire, the long-term antagonist of the Tlaxcalteca, was now their common enemy. In October the combined Spanish–Tlaxcalteca force entered an important Aztec client city, Cholula; during three days of violence the city's population was massacred and the survivors enslaved.

In November the Spanish company reached Tenochtitlán, where they were welcomed in a diplomatic ritual by the *huey tlahtoani*, or emperor, Moctezuma (more properly, Moteuczomatzin). Cortés and his fellow captains later depicted the encounter as a formal surrender, leading to the seizing of Moctezuma, through whom the Spaniards claimed to rule the empire for the next eight months. That interpretation also allowed the Spaniards to characterise the deterioration of peaceful relations with the Aztecs over these months as a growing rebellion. The 'revolt' was propelled by a massacre of Aztec celebrants during the Toxcatl festival in the city centre, while most of the Spanish company was temporarily absent, facing a rival expedition from Cuba. The absent Spaniards returned with the members of that company to find Tenochtitlán in a state of war; weeks of fighting resulted in the killing of Moctezuma, the death of two-thirds of the Spaniards and the desperate nocturnal flight and retreat of the survivors to Tlaxcala in July 1520.

From the Spanish perspective, the challenge was then to crush the revolt of an empire that had been won through hard-fought battles and skilful diplomacy. That challenge was met, they claimed, through the forging of a growing alliance of city-states that had been either enemies of the Aztecs (such as Tlaxcala) or elemental to their empire (such as Tetzaco). With Tetzaco in the alliance by the end of 1520, the siege of the island capital of Tenochtitlán could gradually be executed, culminating in August 1521 with the capture of the last emperor, Cuauhtemoc, and a great city largely reduced to rubble.<sup>11</sup>

11 The sources underpinning the summary of the above paragraphs are too numerous to cite here, but see the various renderings of this narrative (with copious citations) in Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*.



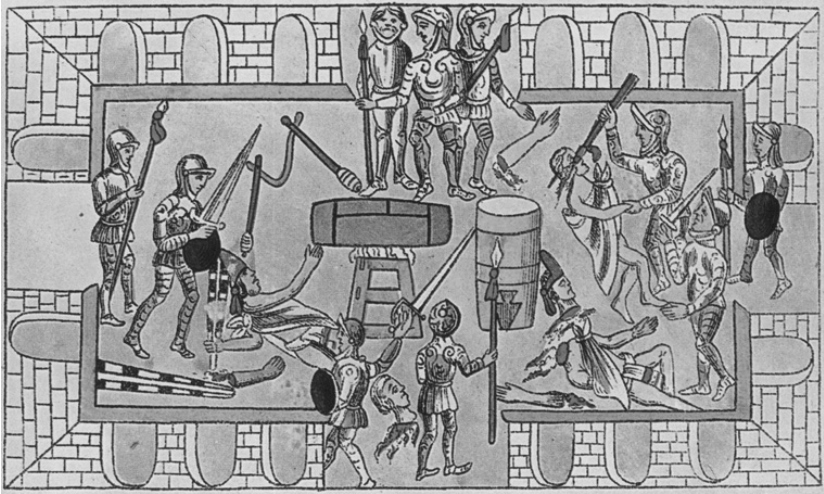


Figure 7.2 The Codex Durán's rendering of the Toxcatl Massacre – initiated by Pedro de Alvarado – in the central plaza of Tenochtitlan in the middle of the 1519–1521 Spanish–Aztec War. The hybrid Spanish-indigenous style conveys well conquest-era butchery by sword-wielding conquistadors of unarmed indigenous men.

For Spaniards, the conclusion of the siege marked the end of Tenochtitlán, from whose ashes would rise the new viceregal capital of Mexico City, and the end of the barbarous Aztec age, replaced immediately by the Christian Kingdom of New Spain. Subsequent military activity, extending north and far south of central Mexico, and lasting until about 1547, would constitute a consolidation of conquest that Spaniards termed 'pacification' – much of which was classified as the suppression of rebellion, thereby permitting the enslaving and selling of indigenous men, women and children.

Yet despite the thriving slave market in Mexico City and the constant decades-long movement of Spanish settlers and companies of indigenous warriors between Mexico and the conquest frontiers, Spaniards viewed their Conquest of Mexico as over. For them, the perpetuation of conquest violence was far less significant than the steady imposition of three colonial institutions: the administrative hierarchy of the colonial regime (stretching from the Spanish viceroy in the city of Mexico down to the *cabildos* or councils of prominent indigenous men who were confirmed as rulers of Mesoamerican towns and villages); the network of *encomiendas* (grants of those towns and villages to Spaniards, who thereby had privileged access to their labour and

tribute goods); and the new church, its parishes and buildings, preachings and dogma, imposed variously and often with violence.<sup>12</sup>

### Thirty Years Wars: ‘A Bellicose People’

These Indians have forced us into many battles and denied us entry into their land, because they are indomitable Indians, a bellicose people

Merida *cabildo*, 1542<sup>13</sup>

Yet even from the perspective of those Spaniards who fought in the war against the Aztecs, it was for most of them part of a broader regional experience. The conquistadors who went to Mexico and other Mesoamerican regions in the 1520s had seldom come directly from Spain; more often, they had spent years sailing, enslaving and settling in the Caribbean. There they learned that interaction with indigenous communities inevitably resulted in violence (which was invariably blamed on the ‘Indians’), and that enslaving indigenous people was the quickest (or, many believed, only) way to profit from expeditions of exploration and conquest.

To see the Spanish–Aztec War more clearly, with its multiple forms of violence at the centre, we need to adopt perspectives and emphases that avoid the traditional story – which tends to be centred on a legendary version of Cortés as the heroic architect of the Conquest.<sup>14</sup> There are various ways to circumvent that triumphalist narrative, but here I suggest three. The first has already been introduced: to place the 1519–21 Spanish–Aztec War in a larger context, thereby including the violent exploration and settlement in the Caribbean that preceded and paralleled events in Mexico, as well as the continuation of that process in northern Mexico and in the Maya region.<sup>15</sup>

The second emphasis is the appreciation of multiple Spanish and indigenous protagonists. By removing Cortés as the military genius and master

12 For a brief overview of this process in Mexico, see Matthew Restall and Robert Schwaller, ‘The Gods Return: Conquest and Conquest Society (1502–1610)’, in William H. Beezley (ed.), *A Companion to Mexican History and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 195–208. For a longer one, covering all of Latin America, see Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

13 Original document transcribed by Diego López de Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatán* (Madrid: Juan García Infanzón, 1688).

14 On the Cortés legend, see Matthew Restall, ‘Moses, Caesar, Hero, Anti-Hero: The Posthumous Faces of Hernando Cortés’, *Leidschrift* 31.2 (2016), 33–58, and the many sources cited there; Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, pp. 231–52.

15 On northern Mexico, see the Ida Altman references in the Bibliographic Essay below; on the Maya area, see the discussion below.

manipulator, the other Spanish captains, self-interested, jostling for survival and advantage, come into clearer view; and the war is seen more accurately as less controlled, more chaotic and consequently more violent. By the same token, the crucial roles played by multiple indigenous leaders are thereby given fuller attention. Men like the upstart *tlahtoani* (ruler or king) of Tetzcoco, Ixtlilxochitl, who emerges as a powerful player – rather than a puppet of Cortés's – manipulating the Spaniards and Tlaxcalteca to tip the balance of power in the Valley of Mexico from Tenochtitlán to Tetzcoco. That not only gives us a more accurate, less Hispanocentric view of the war; it helps us to understand why it became so violent. For Ixtlilxochitl's ability to control all the players and the outcome of the war was limited. His role has been greatly underestimated, but he was not able to achieve total control or rein in all the competing and self-interested sides in the war any more than was Cortés. As a result, there were exceptionally high mortality rates among civilians as well as combatants, village and town massacres were frequent, and hundreds of thousands of Mesoamericans were enslaved (mostly women and children).

That, indeed, is my third emphasis here: to place at the story's centre the high incidence of massacre and enslavement, rather than moments of surrender or the battles that have been inscribed as tragic or glorious. The massacre at Cholula has traditionally been presented as if it were exceptional, the only incident of its kind in the war; in fact, it was typical of how most Mexicans experienced the 1519–21 war, as well as how most Mesoamericans experienced the wars that spanned thirty years.

Useful evidence of the oft-ignored centrality of slaughter and slavery in the wars can be found buried in the telling by Bernal Díaz of what he called the Conquest of New Spain. Díaz was a conquistador-settler who participated in the wars in Mexico and Guatemala, writing a long account that was first published in 1632 – and is still widely read today. But his original manuscript included chapters omitted from the first publication and from almost all modern editions. Titling the chapter 'Why so many Indian men and women were branded as slaves in New Spain', Díaz insisted that because Moctezuma surrendered to Cortés, the violence that later broke out was an Aztec revolt. As we have seen, rebels could be enslaved under royal law. Thus in the middle of the 1519–21 war, claimed Díaz, the Spanish king 'granted us permission' to 'enslave and brand on the face with this G the Mexican Indians and those natives of the towns that had risen up and killed Spaniards'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, vol. 1, pp. 830–6 (his 213th chapter); also see Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, pp. 338–40.

In truth, there had been neither surrender nor rebellion, but a diplomatic welcome to the invaders, followed eventually by a growing resistance as war consumed the region. Part and parcel of warfare with 'Indians' was the Spanish expectation of loot and slaves – Díaz's *G* stood for *guerra* ('war'). Admitted Díaz:

Certainly great frauds were committed over the branding of Indians, because as men, not all of us are very good – rather, there are some of evil disposition, and because at that time there came from Castile and from the islands many Spaniards who were poor and so greatly covetous and avaricious and ravenous to acquire wealth and slaves that they took measures necessary to brand the free.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in a nutshell, did Díaz unwittingly convey all three of the emphases I am making here. In evoking the larger context of prolonged warfare, the expectation by thousands of conquistadors of the rewards of loot and slaves, and the fact that the branding iron and the sword were routinely wielded together, Díaz showed in one short chapter how those factors worked together to inflict lasting violence upon indigenous Mesoamericans. No wonder the chapter was left out of most editions of his book.

Díaz's reference was not just to the Spanish–Aztec War, but to the larger Spanish–Mesoamerican Thirty Years War (although he did not name it). One of the many conflicts within the larger one was what we might call the Spanish–Maya Thirty Years War. It deserves some separate attention, in part because it offers contrasting patterns of violence, and in part because the war against the Aztecs has been studied far more than that against the Maya.

The initial date of Spanish–Maya conflict (1517) saw the first full-scale battle between conquistadors and a Maya army – the encounter that forced the Hernández de Córdoba expedition back to Cuba. The end date (1547) saw the final killings of the third *entrada* or invasion led by Francisco de Montejo in eastern Yucatán, with most conquest events elsewhere in the Maya world falling in between.<sup>18</sup> At that point, there were two small Spanish colonies in the Maya area – in north-west Yucatán and in highland Guatemala – and a scattering of even smaller ones, many of which would

<sup>17</sup> Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, vol. 1, p. 834.

<sup>18</sup> The Maya region comprised what is today Chiapas, Tabasco, the Yucatán peninsula, Guatemala, Belize and western Honduras. There were three Franciscos de Montejo, father, son and nephew, who served as captains in various *entradas* into Tabasco, Yucatán and Honduras (only the father held the official *adelantado* or invasion licence). See Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1948), and the items by Clendinnen, Graham, Lovell, Restall and Asselbergs, and Restall in the Bibliographic Essay below.



Figure 7.3 Theodore De Bry's fanciful visualization, from the 1595 edition of Girolamo Benzoni's *Historia* (plate XIX), of the Spanish conquest of Mayas in northern Yucatán, led by Francisco de Montejo, depicted in the foreground unsheathing his sword, with the 'Indians' as naked (thus barbarian) victims of the invasion – all save one either surrendering or running away.

become abandoned during the decades that followed. Thus the conclusion of the Spanish–Maya Thirty Years War resulted in an archipelago pattern of Spanish colonisation, with most of the Maya area unconquered until the Spanish destruction of the Itza Maya kingdom in what is today's northern Guatemala in 1697, after which many smaller Maya polities still remained independent – some into the twentieth century.

Thus instead of a single event or short, decisive war that marked a 'Conquest of the Maya', there were three violent decades of 'long drawn out, painful, and halting' Spanish–Maya conflict (as an early historian put it),<sup>19</sup> followed by centuries more of intermittent violence. How do we explain the protracted nature of the conflict? In contrast to Mexico, where an intense

<sup>19</sup> Chamberlain, *Conquest and Colonization*, p. 3.



two-year war was followed by prolonged violence across the surrounding regions, the Maya region experienced only the latter period. Why? That same historian drew upon the opinions of the conquistadors themselves to offer three causes: lack of gold and silver to tempt Spaniards; the distractions of conquest campaigns in other regions (such as Peru in the 1530s); and a Maya ‘resistance’ and ‘opposition’ that he characterised as ‘stubborn’.<sup>20</sup>

There is validity to the first two of those explanations, but the last one simply reflects the frequent conquistador complaint that the Mayas, ‘raised from birth in warfare’, as Merida’s settlers put it a few months after the city was founded in 1542, ‘have forced us into many battles and denied us entry into their land, because they are indomitable Indians, a bellicose people’; Cortés too had lamented that the Mayas he encountered in northern Guatemala in 1525 were ‘very bellicose and bold in war’ and did ‘much harm to the Spaniards’.<sup>21</sup> What the Spaniards explained by resorting to a stereotype, seeing persistent Maya bellicosity, was in reality a manifestation of the violence that was endemic to these decades, one that stemmed both from Spanish methods of attempted conquest and colonisation, and from the tenacious way in which Maya communities understandably resisted Spanish invasions.

An additional explanation for the prolonged nature of the Spanish–Maya War was the lack of a Maya empire, with the Maya area comprising at least forty polities or kingdoms. In the words of Gaspar Antonio Chi, a Maya nobleman who was born during the Spanish–Maya War and became an interpreter in the early colony of Yucatán ‘When the conquistadors invaded these provinces, the provinces were already divided, and as each one was an enemy of the other, they fought with one another on little pretext, going out with their captains and their banners, most of them naked, painted with black stripes as a mark of grief to come.’<sup>22</sup> Conquistador captains sought to leverage regional rivalries and deploy one Maya polity against another. That tactic was conventional conquistador wisdom everywhere after 1521, as it was believed that Tenochtitlán had fallen because of Cortés’s skilful use of Tlaxcalteca allies (whose role had indeed been crucial). To some extent it worked in Maya country. The Alvarado brothers benefited in highland

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

21 See Restall and Schwaller, ‘Gods Return’; Restall and Lane, *Latin America*; and also Matthew Restall, ‘Invasion: The Maya at War, 1520s–1540s’, in Andrew Scherer and John Verano (eds.), *Embattled Bodies, Embattled Places: War in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican and the Andes* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), pp. 93–117.

22 *Relaciones de Yucatán* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1898), vol. 1, pp. 142–53, quote on p. 149 from the *Relación de Chunchuchu y Tabi*; on Chi, see Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998).

Guatemala from the willingness of the K'iche', Kaqchikel and Tzutujil to use the disruption of the Spanish invasion to pursue old vendettas. The leaders of Spanish campaigns into eastern and south-eastern Yucatán in the late 1520s and early 1530s survived because anti-Spanish cooperation between Maya polities was sporadic and because local leaders could not resist the temptation of sending the dangerous and demanding foreigners into neighbouring kingdoms (wounded, exhausted, disoriented and undernourished invaders were all too easily manipulated). But those campaigns were disasters. Old rivalries set the scene not for a successful conquest, but for extended violence on many fronts.

Whereas the Aztec Empire made Spanish colonisation possible because the empire could be preserved – its structure of provinces, trade routes and tribute patterns slowly turned into the sinews that held New Spain together – turning neighbouring Maya polities against each other preserved nothing more than their traditional enmity. The tactic did not foster post-invasion colonisation; it fostered prolonged regional warfare that postponed or prevented effective colonisation. Thus the Alvarados' stirring up of K'iche'–Kaqchikel rivalry contributed to two decades of brutal violence in the highlands. The result of the so-called Great Maya Revolt of 1546–7 (which was in fact yet another Spanish campaign into Yucatán's north-east) was not to extend the frontier of the colonial province, but to help ensure there *was* a frontier for centuries to come. The failure of the Spanish conquest in what is now southern Quintana Roo and Belize would prove to be permanent and likewise ensure for centuries a cycle of small-scale but persistent Spanish–Maya violence.

Thus the multiplicity of Maya polities, and the short-sighted Spanish reaction to their regional rivalries, prevented the forging of large colonial provinces, instead permitting only hard-won small ones. As a result, the protracted nature of the Spanish invasions became self-generating: that is, with every *entrada* or campaign that failed or achieved minimal success, the Spanish invaders lost the advantages of surprise and unpredictability, and of horses and steel; by the same token, Maya polities gained the advantages of anticipating Spanish patterns of behaviour and response.

In frustration, Spaniards resorted to the same short-term tactics of violence and enslavement that had undermined efforts to settle the Caribbean. In doing so, they exacerbated the problem of population decline caused by epidemic disease, disruption to agricultural cycles and warfare. In the Maya area, demographic decline prolonged the wars of invasion and hindered colonisation because – without the gold and silver



mines that the Montejos and Alvarados had hoped for in vain – the Maya people themselves were the primary resource upon which colonies might be built. As one conquest era chronicler noted in explaining why the small Maya kingdom of Acalan (settled in 1530 by Montejo as the projected new centre of a peninsula-wide colony) was abandoned in 1531: ‘the Indians were too few to support the Spaniards, and they gave no gold in tribute but only items of food’.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the persistence of independent Maya polities encouraged flight from war zones and conquered kingdoms – a kind of tactical migration catalysed by repeated entradas and in turn ensuring prolonged violence and the pattern of limited, archipelago colonisation by Spaniards.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Maya leaders did not respond to the invaders with consistent hostility, but with friendly curiosity alternating with hostility (fostering Spanish complaints of ‘Indian’ duplicity). The deep-rooted pre-Columbian history of migration within the Maya area, and of contact with central Mexico, had fostered mythologies among the Yucatec, K’iche’ and other Mayas of the remote or foreign origins of their ruling elites. As a result, Mayas were inspired at times to take a closer look and appraise the behaviour of outsiders – some of whom were potentially future insiders. The Yucatec term for foreigner, *dzul*, was also a Maya patronym (and a dynastic polity or kingdom name in south-eastern Yucatán);<sup>25</sup> it likely meant ‘outsider’ rather than ‘foreigner’, lacking racial implications before the Spanish invasions.

Maya leaders therefore often initially met Spaniards with welcoming interest, which the invaders hungrily interpreted as surrender, keen to see a repetition in every Maya kingdom of Moctezuma’s famous capitulation to Cortés in 1519. But Moctezuma’s surrender was a lie, invented after his murder by the Spaniards, already blossoming by the time of the Spanish–Maya Thirty Years War into a spectacular fiction believed as fact by Alvarados, Montejos and other captains – who were thus driven mad with frustration over the failure of Maya leaders to play roles as mini Moctezumas.<sup>26</sup>

23 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Coronica de las Indias* (1547) (Madrid, 1851–5), book 32, ch. 4 (also quoted by Chamberlain, *Conquest and Colonization*, p. 89).

24 Tactical migration may have had roots going back many centuries to the Classic Maya era; see Stephen D. Houston and Takeshi Inomata, *The Classic Maya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 45.

25 The kingdom was called Dzuluinicob (‘foreign men’), presumably by its neighbours; Grant Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History on a Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

26 Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés*, esp. ch. 2.

The interested welcome that Spanish captains misread as surrender often proved to be something else, just as it had done in Tenochtitlán in 1520: a gathering of information leading to a violent attempt to evict the invaders. In Mexico, in Maya kingdoms and in other parts of Mesoamerica, Spaniards were quick to imagine victory. They founded cities and planned colonies, only to despair in violent infuriation over ‘rebellions’ by the ‘Indians’. Spaniards were unaware that from the indigenous perspective there had been neither surrender nor rebellion, neither victory nor defeat – only repeated cycles of invasion, epidemic disease, starvation, slaughter and enslavement. Such misunderstandings served to further prolong the multivalent violence of the wars of invasion in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica.

### Bibliographic Essay

For a general overview of the historiography of the Spanish Conquest era in the Americas, a useful essay is Matthew Restall, ‘The New Conquest History’, *History Compass* 10.2 (2012), 151–60. For broader historiographical trends in the scholarship on New Spain, see Kevin Terraciano and Lisa Sousa, ‘The Historiography of New Spain’, in José Moya (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 25–64.

For more on early enslavement of, and violence against, indigenous groups in the Spanish Caribbean, see Massimo Livi Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Erin Stone, ‘Slave Raiders vs. Friars: Tierra Firme, 1513–522’, *The Americas* 74.2 (2017), 139–70. A detailed treatment of indigenous enslavement in the Americas, including all North America, can be found in Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

A primary source on early violent encounters between Spaniards and indigenous Americans is Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Historia de las Indias*, but as it is not yet available in English I recommend *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003). Neil Whitehead treats early violence in the Caribbean, along with a useful overview of the use of the term ‘Carib’ in justifying indigenous slavery, in *Of Cannibals and Kings: Primal Anthropology in the Americas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); the book is the 7th in the Latin American Originals series, of which ten volumes (as of 2018) present primary sources, in translation with accessible introductions, on the history and literature of the Spanish Conquest.

For more on the wars of invasion and conquest of central Mexico, see Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting that Changed History* (New York: Ecco, 2018), and Matthew Restall and Robert Schwaller, ‘The Gods Return: Conquest and Conquest Society (1502–1610)’, in William H. Beezley (ed.), *A Companion to Mexican*

*History and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 195–208. Ida Altman's *The War for Mexico's West: Indians and Spaniards in New Galicia, 1524–1550* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010) and her *Contesting Conquest: Indigenous Perspectives on the Spanish Occupation of Nueva Galicia, 1524–1545*, *Latin American Originals* 12 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017) provide an example of Spanish conquest wars in northern Mexico.

The vast literature on invasion and conquest in the Yucatán includes Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1948); Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Graham, *Maya Christians and Their Churches* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); W. George Lovell, *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821*, revised 4th edn (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); and Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998) and 'Invasion: The Maya at War, 1520s–1540s', in Andrew Scherer and John Verano (eds.), *Embattled Bodies, Embattled Places: War in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican and the Andes* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), pp. 93–117. For the larger context of Spanish–Maya protracted conquest and conflict in southern Yucatán, see Pedro Bracamonte y Sosa, *La conquista inconclusa de Yucatán: Los mayas de la montaña, 1560–1680* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2001). For the fall of the Itza kingdom in Guatemala, see Grant D. Jones, *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

In addition to most of the items listed above, studies on the role of indigenous peoples in the Spanish conquest wars include Florine G. L. Asselbergs and Matthew Restall, *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars*, *Latin American Originals* 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); Amber Brian, Bradley Benton and Pablo García Loaeza, *The Native Conquistador: Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Account of the Conquest of New Spain*, *Latin American Originals* 10 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); Laura Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (eds.), *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); and Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006). On indigenous cartographic narratives of the conquest wars, see Florine G. L. Asselbergs, *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan: A Nahua Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala* (Leiden: CNWS, 2004; Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2008); and on textual Mesoamerican accounts, see James Lockhart (ed.), *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (1995) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), and Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa and Kevin Terraciano (eds.), *Mesoamerican Voices: Native-Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Oaxaca, Yucatan, and Guatemala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).